



February 12, 2001

The Honorable Greg Ganske
The Honorable John Dingell
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representatives Ganske and Dingell:

On behalf of the 220,000 members and 1,200 affiliates of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), I am writing to express our support for your legislation, the Bipartisan Patient Protection Act of 2001 (HR 526). As the nation's largest organization representing people with severe mental illnesses and their families, NAMI believes that federal standards are necessary to ensure that access to the most advanced treatment is not compromised in the name of cost savings.

In particular, NAMI is especially pleased that your legislation will address critical issues that are of great concern to people with severe mental illnesses and their families including use of restrictive prescription drug formularies and meaningful external appeals. NAMI is grateful that your legislation will protect the ability of patients and their doctors to go beyond a health plan's limited drug formulary when it is necessary to find the most effective medication. This protection is critically important for people with serious brain disorders such as schizophrenia and manic-depressive illness who depend on newer medications as their best hope for recovery.

NAMI also strongly supports your proposal for external grievance procedures that would require that decisions of independent review panels be legally binding upon health plans and prevent health plans from being able to select the independent third-party review panel. Patients and their families should be able to take their claim of an unfair denial of treatment coverage to an unbiased process for an adjudication of their rights.

NAMI also supports key provisions in HR 526 regarding access to medical specialists. Health plans should be required to provide access to covered specialty care within a plan's network and allow consumers unobstructed access to a specialist, such as a psychiatrist, over a longer period, without repeated and unnecessary pre-authorizations from their plan. Finally, NAMI would like to thank you for including in your bill strong protections for consumer access to medical treatment costs associated with clinical trials. Health plans should not be allowed to deny patients access to these trials by refusing to pay for routine medical care.

NAMI is grateful for your efforts on behalf of people with severe mental illnesses and their families. Your bipartisan approach to this difficult issue is an important step forward in placing the interests of consumers and families ahead of politics. NAMI looks forward to working with you to ensure passage of meaningful managed care consumer protection legislation in the 107th Congress.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Shannon
NAMI Board President

NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR THE MENTALLY ILL

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